"Art, as the harbinger of social commentary, is a vital component of a flourishing democratic society that values independent voices and critical thinking," writes Carson Phillips. His exploration of the art of Willy Fick offers educators and students an important lens through which to view the responses of those Germans who chose to express their opposition to fascism. Phillips notes that "the need for individual responsibility in nurturing a civil society remains an essential effort." Pair this essay with the examination of modern-day Berlin memorials examined in depth by Pnina Rosenberg (pp. 90–96) and Phillips (pp. 97–104) for a rich and diverse study of art as dissent.

Carson Phillips

Willy Fick: The Metaphoric Language and Art of Dissent

When the community no longer raises objections, there is an end, too, to the suppression of evil passions, and men perpetrate deeds of cruelty, fraud, treachery and barbarity so incompatible with their level of civilization that one would have thought them impossible.
—Sigmund Freud (1964), "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death"

During the National Socialist period in Germany, as art and culture were being forged into expressions of Fascist ideology, dissenting artists voiced objections to the regime in astute and provocative ways. Willy Fick, a politically left-leaning Catholic from Cologne, Germany, expressed his opposition to fascism through a metaphorical use of imagery, shape, and texture in his artwork. If his middle-class upbringing and patriarchal family life made him an unlikely opponent of fascism, his involvement with the Dadaist movement that gave voice to his pacifist stance, his opposition to the military rearmament of Germany, and his reaction to the persecution of German Jewry demanded it.

The Dadaism that captured the imagination of German and European artists in the aftermath of WWI was the genesis for Fick's fusion of artistic styles. A member of the Cologne Dadaist "stupid"[1] group founded in 1920 by him, his sister Angelika Hoerle, Heinrich Hoerle, Franz Seiwert, Anton Räderscheidt, and Marta Hegemann, Fick's provocative style and bold use of color gave his work a unique flair. In an era when dissenting voices became increasingly scarce, Fick critiqued both the fascist re-ordering of all segments of German life and society and the apathy of so many ordinary Germans. His messages were powerful and subversive enough to have the Nazis deem his work *entartete kunst*, "degenerate art."

Much of Fick's work was destroyed in the 1944 bombing of Cologne. However, surviving pieces have been salvaged from reproductions in exhibition catalogues. These images provide Holocaust scholars and educators with another lens through which to consider the paradigm of bystanders, active bystanders, and individuals who took action on behalf of another or others. For me, Fick is most aptly described as an "anti-bystander," someone who comments upon broad changes in society, reflects upon the values and directions being set by leaders, and attempts to revitalize critical thought in an apathetic or conformist population. This is, admittedly, a slightly different usage of the term than is usual in character or values education programs. In that context, "anti-bystander" is commonly used to describe the motivation of individuals to become active participants in events, whether intervening to prevent a physical act of violence or standing up and taking action on behalf of another. Describing Willy Fick, a pacifist and anti-fascist, as an anti-bystander draws attention to broader conceptual issues affecting society. Aware of what was happening around him, Fick used his talents to rally an apathetic citizenry toward engagement. Consequently, the anti-bystander has the potential to provoke critical thinking and effect positive change before violence actually occurs.

Fick's anti-bystander stance provided social commentary, highlighted broad societal concepts, and attempted to awaken an apathetic populace, much like a biblical prophet's role of conveying messages and warnings to a population straying off course. The following close examination of three of his works reveals an erudite artist who, as the precarious times necessitated, carefully veiled his dissenting opinions through sophisticated artistry.

In "Speaker" (*der Redner*) [Fig. 1], Fick cryptically con-

FIG. 1: Speaker / Redner
Archival Photograph from the Fick-Littlefield Collection.

demns the military build-up of the Luftwaffe by including the sequential letters ABDH. These reference the four-letter *Stammkennzeichen*, factory code, for the Heinkel He111.[2] This letter coding system, initiated after 1934, identified the manufacturer by the first two letters and the training school by the last two letters. The Heinkel He111 was built in violation of the Treaty of Versailles, and while it was described as a transport aircraft, it was in reality a medium bomber that could swiftly cover medium range distances. It became a standard *Luftwaffe* bomber, and by summer 1939 it would account for nearly 75 percent of the *Luftwaffe* bombing detachments.[3] The speaker's arm, raised in a distorted fashion, seems to mimic the fascist salute, while two empty, white-chalked facial profiles pay attention to the speaker's actions. Their mouths, barely open, seem to mimic the minimal opposition to the path National Socialism embarked upon. Fick frequently used partial human forms and silhouettes to represent dehumanization and the negative effect of living under a totalitarian regime. The masks that lay scattered about on the floor reference the unengaged, apathetic masses, who demonstrate an interest only in seeing what is put in front of them. Fick's dystopian public easily ignores the other facets of their community and the re-ordering process. These partial human beings, these *bystanders*, allow their futures to be dictated by the speaker. Fick's haunting image thus warns of the dangers of a totalitarian regime and the dangers of being a bystander to the events unfolding.

Similarly, "Glass Roof" (*der Glasdach*) [Fig. 2] provides a powerful depiction of the commodification of society under totalitarianism and the fate of individuals outside the realm of Nazi favor. The cyclical symbolism of the chessboard, a favorite technique of Fick's, represents both the unfolding of time and space as well as the ongoing alienation of dissenting voices and victims in German society. It strategically separates the diminutive figure of a man from the creeping, menacing vegetation on the other side of the painting. The critique is veiled, as was necessary for the times. However, the painting nonetheless manages to show the diminutive man melting into the chessboard, as if being erased from his environment. The allusion here is to a future wherein the creeping vegetation will overtake the chessboard and

FIG. 2: Glass Roof / Glasdach
Archival Photograph from the Fick-Littlefield Collection

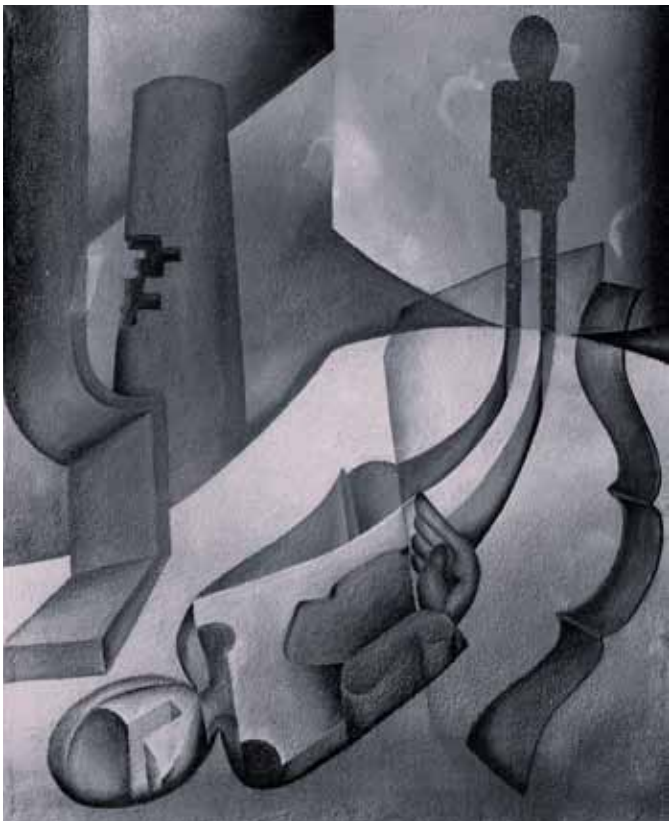

FIG. 3: Morceau
Archival Photograph from the Fick-Littlefield Collection

the solitary figure representing those outside the Nazi societal parameters will disappear, while the bomber ominously roams the sky. Fick's warning of the insidious onslaught of totalitarianism, the erosion of human rights, and the removal of individuals from society eerily foreshadows the future of the German Reich.

Finally, in "*Morceau*" [Fig. 3], the viewer encounters another haunting portrayal of both society and humanity. The industrial smokestack is fragmented at its center. This can be interpreted as the decay of ethical standards in German industry, which profited from the Nazi rearmament of Germany. Fick reverses the natural order of human being and shadow: The human figure is prostrate while the shadow becomes a tall, solitary figure on the horizon, representing the silencing of opposing voices. Here we encounter Fick's depiction of his new reality where dissent had to be practiced with discretion, in the shadows. These partial beings were Fick's visual metaphor for those who did not dissent or otherwise voice opposition to Nazi policies. As the human figure lies prone on the ground, it is impossible not to notice the resemblance to the fascist salute in the outstretched hand. When the shadows of humanity become the bulwark of ethical standards, ominous times are afoot.

Willy Fick developed his own metaphoric language so that he could continue to express his pacifist and anti-fascist ideals. Art, as the harbinger of social commentary, is a vital component of a flourishing democratic society that values independent voices and critical thinking. Fick's imagery captured the emotional impact of the tyranny of National Socialism while expressing his objections to the regime. The need for individual responsibility in nurturing a civil society remains an essential effort for the twenty-first century. Speaking out against totalitarianism, antisemitism, and genocide and rejecting the passivity of the bystander continue to be as important for the global community today as when Fick created his art more than 70 years ago. ■

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NOTES

1. For more information on Fick's involvement with the "stupid" group, refer to Herzogenrath & Tueber (1986).
2. www.luftwaffe-experten.org/stammkennzeichen.html
3. www.waffenhq.de/flugzeuge/he111.html

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